



Strengthening Families – Enhancing Education Opportunities

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Introduction¹

In Germany, education opportunities are unequally distributed and often determined by family background. Inadequate education is “inherited” more than in other countries. In school and other education institutions, youth from socially disadvantaged and underprivileged familial backgrounds are being left behind. The significant cost society has accumulated from inadequate education effects society as a whole as well as each individual.

Our society must set the mutual goal of ensuring the accessibility of fair education opportunities and providing the best possible upbringing conditions for all children. Family politics, for this reason, has become a central political field in the last few years. Reforms in childcare facilities, early childhood educational institutions and schools are widely discussed, implemented and criticized. An education system should strive to value every child, provide individual support, encourage the love of learning and leave no child behind. Achieving these goals is certainly a great and important step towards ensuring more equal opportunities in education.

Yet, can educational institutions alone solve the deficiency in education opportunities? Can childcare centers and schools compensate for the lack of support in the development environment in one family or another? Children spend a large amount of their time in the familial environment – even when they attend a full day school or childcare center. The family is the most important environment for bringing up children. In the family, children learn how to master daily life, acquire social skills and cope with conflict. The family is a social system, where children learn from individual care relationships (Schier and Jurczyk 2007), familiarize themselves with hierarchy and democracy aspects and gain confidence through rituals and routines (Jurczyk and Lange 2008). In the family, doors are opened to different worlds and experience possibilities – or in some cases remain closed. The parents and siblings, partner of the parent and grandparents play different roles in the upbringing and development of children and their participation cannot be easily replaced with additional educational institutions, childcare providers and teachers.

Fair education opportunities for all children can only be accomplished with the involvement of the family and parents. The family must be acknowledged as an important learning environment because children need both good quality educational institutions and strong families.

The family has many faces: a married couple with a child, the single parent with children, the patchwork family, a big family living together with grandparents and extended relatives – it is difficult to find a precise definition. A more fitting definition of the family should start with the child, focusing on his/her well-being upbringing, and education opportunities. We concentrate

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on the core family; in which children are raised, i.e. families in our context consist of many variations: children with a parent/guardian (and their partner) or with both parents/guardians.

(1) Family is the most important place for bringing up children

For every child, the family is the first and most important point of reference and in most cases, where the child experiences attention, affection, support, and security. In addition, it serves as a learning environment for children, where they learn to navigate through social situations such as getting along with others and many other rich learning aspects. Families influence – often unconsciously – the functional, social and emotional competences of their children. Parents are the most important role models for their children. Moreover, the child's image of his/her parents, their educational aspirations and the child's confidence in their skills, is highly meaningful for his or her self perception, confidence and motivation.

According to international education research, sustainable change in the development and education of children is best accomplished in collaboration with parents. Education political measures are most successful and lasting when educational institutions view parents as active education partners and offer tailored support (vgl. NICHD 2003, NICHD 2006, Belsky et. al. 2007, Laroque et.al. 2011). Parents' awareness of their importance on the development of their children is a key factor for a child's successful educational career (Schweinhart 2011).

Furthermore, international research on the effect of early education programs shows that parents' characteristics, such as family background, influence the child's development far more than any kind of early education and care. With this theme in mind, Belsky writes: „So it appears that what matters to a child most is the kind of family he comes from, that is, whether the family is economically viable, parents are partnered, mother is not depressed, and her parenting is itself sensitive to the needs of the child. Knowing these things tells us more about a child's life prospects than does her child care experience“ (Belsky 2009: 5).

Subsequently, these findings indicate that good quality childcare facilities and schools can help children development their cognitive, linguistic and social competences. They can also open opportunities for children, especially those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. The measure of quality pedagogical work is bringing the parents aboard and in turn changing the upbringing conditions of the child. A separation between upbringing and formal education and the division of responsibilities between families and educational institutions is no longer appropriate and needs to be overhauled. A partnered and respectful cooperation between parents and institutional professionals is an important step towards ensuring fair education opportunities.

(2) Parents want the best for their children and strive to provide the best upbringing conditions

Almost all parents want the best for their children and strive to provide the best possible upbringing conditions. However, parents do not always get the credit they deserve and are sometimes even negatively portrayed in the media. In Germany, the public sometimes constructs a negative image of disadvantaged parents. This generalization is based on the belief that low-income, undereducated parents are less likely to be in the position to or even do not desire to raise and support their children in the best manner. In particular, socially disadvantaged parents have been targeted by the media and referred to as “uncaring”. The accusation has involved claims that these parents prefer spending their money on their own consumer desires rather than on their children. Along these lines, there is a shared assumption that financial transfers to such families are mostly misused for unintended purposes and rarely “benefit the children”.

Yet, in most cases family life is managed despite difficult conditions and increased demands on the parents (see below). Most parents in difficult situations try to give their children the best possible care and support. However, it is important not to minimize extreme cases of family failure: when a child’s welfare is at risk, social services and local actors must intervene quickly and decisively.

A glance at the income and consumption survey of the “Statistisches Bundesamt” (the German Federal Bureau of Statistics) shows that socially disadvantaged parents allot a much higher portion of their funds to spending on their children (Münnich 2006). Also, low-income parents place great importance on providing well for their children in the areas of free time activities/culture components/hobbies, education and saving. In comparison, more financially stable families ranked higher in the spending categories of health care and vacation trips.

In addition to this data, other surveys have shown that socially disadvantaged parents are more likely to strictly limit themselves and their own consumption desires than reduce spending on their children (Wüstendörfer 2008, Diakonisches Werk and Stiftung Braunschweigischer Kulturbesitz 2011). The majority of families want to spend their money to secure the welfare of their children. In particular, mothers do not want their children to “lag behind” in comparison to other children. They are frequently ready to give up or limit their own consumer wishes and needs to make their children’s participation possible (BMFSFJ 2010: 8). Moreover, low-income parents are sensitive to their children’s problems and see quality education as the most important upbringing goal (Wüstendörfer 2008, Diakonisches Werk and Stiftung Braunschweigischer Kulturbesitz 2011). Their wishes and fears for their children are the same as those of middle class parents (AWO 2010: 40).

The middle class' limited view of families in socially difficult life contexts fails to encompass the variety of cultural differences e.g. different upbringing styles and goals, a different image of children and children's learning styles (Borke u.a. 2011, AWO 2010). Therefore, competences and resources of children in different milieus are ignored such as multilingualism, independence (AWO 2010) or personal ties to a group (relatedness) (Borke u.a. 2011).

(3) Due to the growing challenges, success is not always feasible

Even when parents want the best for their children, the conditions for families are becoming increasingly challenging. Families are more vulnerable to crisis (Rauschenbach 2011: 7). Challenges in professional life, strong individualization, increasing education demands and the globalized work market, means the family is no longer independent and quasi natural given, but increasing in complexity (Schier und Jurczyk 2007). Parents must, as workers, be flexible and mobile, a lifestyle difficult to combine with the rituals and routines of family life. With the changes in the work market, the risk has also increased for families to fall into vulnerable living situations.

Structural risk factors in the upbringing of children are: low-income, unemployment, a low education level of the parents, a migration background, and living in single parent households. These factors are not independent from each other – and there is often a correlation between them (Walper und Riedel 2011: 13). Societal changes result in these factors occurring with more frequency and accumulation (Rauschenbach 2011). The polarization of living conditions means that resources are increasingly unequally distributed and the group of burdened families is growing (Jurczyk et. al. 2009: 7). This leads to an accumulation of risk factors, which may raise vulnerable living conditions for underage children (Walper und Riedel 2011). It does not mean that difficult social structural conditions inevitably endanger the development and growth of children; but rather it makes it much harder for parents in vulnerable situations to give their children a rich home environment and comprehensive support.

Lack of financial means often hinders families from giving their children the best support. In a low-income family e.g. often inexpensive, unhealthy groceries are bought instead of fresh fruit and vegetables (BMFSFJ 2010:18). Some of these families lack the knowledge of how to provide their children with reasonably priced nutritious food (BMFSFJ 2010:18) or how to create a rich home environment on a limited income. Also, in some family households with limited income parents strive to hide their vulnerable financial situation by buying demonstrative consumer goods for their children such as mobile phones, expensive clothing and toys (BMFSFJ 2010: 8).

To sum up, the education background of parents plays a key role in the successful upbringing of their children: firstly, the education background affects the family climate. Secondly,

there is a tendency of low education levels resulting in low-income. Thirdly, children are offered a less rich development environment (Walper und Riedel 2011: 15).

(4) Family politics lacks comprehensive answers: How can we overcome these challenges?

(a) Financial support for families fails to satisfy the needs of low-income families – the situation in Germany

Given the plethora of marriage and family measures and services in Germany (a total of 160 measures according to the BMFSFJ 2012) and the extent of these resources (2009 were approximately 195 Million Euro, BMFSFJ 2012) it would be safe to assume the problems are being effectively targeted and addressed. Yet, the variety of different services makes it difficult to assess whether financial grants are in fact reaching children and families in vulnerable situations. The German BMFSFJ (Bundesministerium für Frauen, Senioren, Familien und Jugend – Ministry for Women, Seniors, Families and Youth) and the Ministry of Finance have been working for years to create a complex scientific evaluation of marriage and family orientated services, however at this point no results have yet been documented.

The high numbers of family support measures are misleading because they paint the picture of vast financial support for families in Germany. It is not very well known that many of these measures do not address families with children or that some measures benefit more privileged families rather than those in need. Also, international comparison shows that both disposable family income and family support measures in Germany are only slightly above OECD average. While disposable family income in most OECD countries has risen in the past 20 years, it is stagnating in Germany (OECD 2011: 43).

OECD countries spend on average 2.2 percent of their GDP on family measures. The greatest percentage of GDP is spent in France and the U.K. (above 3.5 %), followed by Hungary, Denmark, Belgium. Sweden, Luxembourg (above 3 %), Norway, Iceland, the Netherlands, Australia (above 2.75 %), and Germany (2.75%). Contrary to common belief in Germany, direct financial support only accounts for 1.1 % of German GDP – and thus ranks below OECD average (1.2 %). The greatest part of German family measures is given as tax reductions, from which families with higher income benefit more than families in difficult financial situations (OECD 2011: 40).

(b) Institutional offers and support for families

Financial support is not sufficient to effectively help families in vulnerable living situations. An array of different programs is needed for parents, providing them with a new impulse for their parenting and educational tasks. Such programs should empower parents and encourage them to ask for help and not shy away from it. Also, these programs would lend families a

helping hand by providing consultation in the areas of finances, debt management, health and nutrition. In addition, a good quality educational infrastructure is needed to ensure the care and education of children and to open opportunities for increased employment amongst parents.

Survey results clearly indicate that these struggling parents want support: over half of the respondents of a German survey in the Braunschweig region claim they would like assistance in dealing with the local family services authorities and public offices, more than 45 percent, state that they desire support regarding parenting questions and school problems and more than 40 percent of the respondents would like aid in dealing with debt (Diakonisches Werk and Stiftung Braunschweigischer Kulturbesitz 2011: 41).

In order for institutional measures to be effective and accurate, it is highly important that the individuals suffering from these hardships be involved in solving them and play an active role in determining which services would be most beneficial in coping with their daily challenges. Service structures should be required to develop their structure directly based on the hardships of the affected families, and institutions should collaborate in building a stable network for these families. In addition, the social services structure should lower the threshold for receiving aid.

To open opportunities for children from socially disadvantaged parents, it is necessary for educational institutions to have an integral part in the support system. It is essential for parents and siblings to be acknowledged and valued by educational institutions for the role they play in the development of children. Parents must be involved in the institutions as irreplaceable upbringing and education partners. By providing free time activities and educational offers for children and parents in educational institutions, an effective step is taken in making participation easier in extracurricular activities such as sports, music, parenting classes, language classes and counseling courses. In addition, financial aid should be available for socially disadvantaged families. These families are often not fully informed of the extracurricular activities available and move in a limited radius, not using programs outside their communities. Parents can be reached through different outlets, in the case daycare facilities or schools are positively viewed, they may serve as an outreach tool to connect with parents and give them the support they need.

Successful education and upbringing partnerships between parents and educational institutions (Textor 2009 and 2011) help the child as a whole, creates trust between families and institutions which in turn ensures consistency in education, upbringing and family life. Good educational partnerships reap many benefits: research results from the USA have demonstrated how parent involvement has a positive effect on the learning outcomes of children. In

particular, in low-income neighborhoods, sustainable parent involvement improves children's learning outcomes (Epstein 2005).

Therefore, the relationship between parents and pedagogues must extend beyond parents' information night. Parents must be involved on equal terms, and familial and cultural aspects be taken into account. Childcare providers and teachers should be given cultural sensitivity training and taught how to involve parents in their child's education. Educators need to learn how to tap into the enormous potential resource of parent involvement. Parent involvement should be institutionally anchored and taken into mind as resource management. An outpour of support for educational partnerships from care providers, educators and institutions is not guaranteed from the start. First, educators must rethink their understanding of pedagogy, consciously confront prejudices about parents and attend further training.

(5) Children need family and good educational institutions – the best of both worlds

Family politics and education politics strengthens the family, while simultaneously strengthens the upbringing conditions and education opportunities for all children. Family and education politics must think and work together. Effective investment in support for families in their parenting and education tasks means offering financial support, thus ensuring a quality family life, and supporting families with high quality educational institutions. Most importantly, remembering to regard parents as serious partners and experts in their children's education.

It has been shown by current research, that focusing on educational institutions alone as the sole creator of fair opportunities for all children, while the family sits on the sidelines, is not a solution. Parents raise their children, pass down values and offer them a rich learning environment. Families play an important role in educational achievements and education chances. They have a greater impact on their children's education opportunities and their chances in life in general than educational institutions – regardless of the number of hours children spend in educational institutions.

Children need both – family and good educational institutions. The main task is to combine the best of both worlds, provide the best upbringing conditions for children and compensate potential weaknesses and financial hardships (Heitkötter 2009: 19). Success will then be seen through the bridging of disadvantaged, privileged social spheres and educational institutions, thus ensuring fair opportunities for all children.

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